BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Behavior communicates. Actions speak louder than words. Ideas become contagious when we see them expressed in the lives of people. Jesus prayed that his disciples might be one - not for their own spiritual gratification but so that people would see their oneness and be stimulated to believe the Gospel.

In my file of resources is an article from an old edition of Presbyterian Life which describes an experience with the contagious experience of love ob served in real life:

> "It was a slushy, cold, wintry day, and on my way home I hurried to the store to pick up a loaf of bread. People looked tired. Irritable. Men on errands similar to mine trudged wearily. Then I noticed a mother and her child skipping and singing down the street. You seldom see mothers on the street with small children just before dinner, and if you do they're not skipping and singing, but yanking and fussing. But here the pair were, enjoying their dance and life. I smiled, entered the store, picked up my bread and pondered a moment. Then I raced to the bakery counter for some chocolate eclairs. Back on the street I saw the young family again, now joined by the person they had been on their way to meet - the husband and father. And the three of them delighted in each other; they were merrily chatting, laughing and holding hands. He was the only man around who looked happy. (you might think that's because he was the only man met by his wife. But I've seen lots of men met by their wives and those men haven't looked very happy.) The meaning of that family's joy was deeper than that. They had learned how to be glad for one another. I thanked God for

this beauty and, hurrying home, prayed that I might show some of it to my wife and son. That day I had found life and the grace of God in three people I had never seen before (or since, although I looked for them), and I'd found it simply because they were standing fast in their love and joy.(P.L.8/1/70)

Has anything like that ever happened to you? My definition of freedom is not found in a scholarly tome - but in a moment of pure magic when I happen to see my young son swinging alone. The best definition of joy I have is not philosophical -but that magic moment when school lets out acorss the street and little people start racing up the sidewalk toward home. The soundest experience of human brotherhood I perceive is similarly those magic moments when I can observe a white child and a black child playing together without any self consciousness at all.

Ideas become contagious when we see them expressed in the lives of people. Something deeply compelling is communicated when people are free enough to express their love for each other. It is a lesson Jesus wanted his disciples to learn. As they confronted the task of communicating a new idea to a pagan world, thier best resource, their most effective tool, was simply their love for each other.

The New Testament Lesson this morning was taken from the 17th Chapter of the Gospel according to John. It was the final portion of what is called the "High Priestly Prayer" of Jesus. It takes place just prior to his arrest and betrayal. The prayer is a remarkable and much-studied document. In it Jesus prays for himself, for his disciples, and then for all "those who believe in me because of their (the Disciples') message. Listen to a part of that prayer again. Jesus was praying for the Church down through the ages. He was, if you will, praying for you and me.

"I do not pray for them only, but also for those who believe in me because of their message. I pray that they may all be one. O Father! May they be one in us....May they be one, so that the world will believe that

you sent me....I in them, and you in me, so they may be completely one, in order that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me."

It's very clear. The will of Christ himself for his Church was a unity so conspicuous that others, seeing it, would know the very reality of God, the power of his love and the truth of the Gospel. How noble that sounds! And how badly we fail.

What does the world see when it looks at the Church? Is there an observable unity and love and joy that communicates to others that the Church has hold of something very special? Sometimes, perhaps. But not often, I fear.

I was interested to read about a strange thing that happened on the first Memorial Day. "Some Washington Church women had asked permission of the War Department to put flowers on the soldier's graves at Arlington Cemetary. The permission was granted and May 30 was designated as the day, but a stern order was attached.No flowers were to be put on the 300 graves of the Confederate soldiers who were buried in a separate section. The ladies obediently decorated the other graves and left the Confederate headstones bare. General James A. Garfield made the speech. Then, when the crowd had left a high wind rose. It blew almost all the flowers from the Union graves into the Confederate section. It was almost as if God had spoken. (From "Hate, the Pernicious Enemy", George Sweazey, Models 26,May 1974)

Langdon Gilkey, a theologian at the University of Chicago spent World War II in a Japanese concentration camp. Most of the prisoners were Christian missionaries, Christian business men and wives, teachers and British officials. Time and time again the group was unab le to solve the problems of equitably dividing the available space - or distributing Red Cross parcels among themselves. That is, the idea of Christian love - sharing, sacrificing didn't amount to very much.- to the great pleasure of the Japanese captors.

In fact, it seems sometimes that Christian people who can be and are

generous, loving and caring in relationship to outsiders, fail to extend even minimal consideration to each other. That idea is included in a delightful Phylis McGinley poem entitled "How to Start a War". During the Reformation there was a split over the practice of Baptism: a man by the name of Zwingli favored sprinkling; another leader by the name of Muntzer held out for total immersion.

Said Zwingli to Muntzer,
"I'll have to be blunt, sir.
I don't like your version
Of Total Immersion.
And since God's on my side
And I'm on the dry side,
You'd better swing ovah
to me and Jehovah."
Cried Muntzer, "It's schism,
Is Infant Baptism!
Since I've had a sign, sir,
That God's will is mine, sjr,
Let all men agree
With Jehovah and me,
Or go to Hell, singly,"
Said Muntzer to Swingly,

And each drew his sword
On the side of the Lord.

More immediately, I was involved some time ago in a negotiating process the goal of which was to get two Presbyterian congregations to merge. It was a logical goal: neithter was strong enough to go it alone: four miles separated them and many people drove by the other Church each Sunday morning. The project failed. I discovered later that hostility between the two groups

stemmed from an incident involving the call of a minister. It seems that the two had gotten together one time before and agreed to share one minister. But at the last minute one of the congregations came up with the money and extended the call on its own. There were plenty of bad feelings. When I asked the gentleman who was telling this story when this had happened, he told me he wasn't sure, but it was around 1930.

That's not a very pretty portrait for the world to see. And if our love for each other in the Church, our unity -is as important as Jesus apparently felt it was, we ought, really, to be doing some soul searching.

The church as an institution is in a valley today. Statistics are down across the nation,and in most denominations. There are plenty of reasons: among them the continuing division between the pietists and the social activists. But I continue to maintain that the Church's major problem is not political or social, but the very simple matter that the world isn't seeing much conspicuous love and joy and unity in our sanctuaries. I have an idea that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about when he tied the oneness of his disciples to their ability to communicate the Gospel to the rest of the world.

The problem comes to focus in the local congregation; right here, if you will. Unlike our predecessors in the faith, we do not live together in a well-defined parish. Unlike them, we don't need the church as our only social outlet. Unlike them, belonging to the Church for us can be entirely impersonal. If we chose to have it that way we can belong to the Church and never get closer than an informal and occassional handshake.

Lloyd Olgilvie, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood once put it this way:

"On an airliner recently, the stewardess, in explaining the oxygen equipment said, 'In case of an emergency, your mask will fall into place." How like the Church! We have masks for each circumstance. Our endless meetings and ecclessiastical administrivia leave little time or opportunity for us to be known and understood as people. The good news we need to share

with the world is not only what God has done, but what he is doing with the raw material of our prob lems and potentials in relationship with ourselves, others, and the world."

That's terribly true. The Church can be impersonal as a result of its own institutional structures. It's possible to belong and remain a stranger. But, in candor, let's add to that our penchant for impersonality. We don't want to get personal with other people. It's embarrassing, and inconvenient and who knows,if we ever broke through the barriers or got beneath the masks we might find that a stranger needed something from us. It's easier to keep at arm's length, to exchange pleasantries over coffee and let it go at that. Closeness is too sticky and risky.

Robert Rains comments; "We belong to Christ by belonging to each other.. We have no choice in the matter. Some of our brothers we may like; others we may dislike. But they belong to us and we belong to them in either case. Because we are involved with him,we are involved with them. And the reverse is also true; through them we move closer to Him....we might wish to av oid this horizontal belonging and cling only to Him. But we cannot do so. We belong to Christ only by belonging to each other." (Reshaping the Christian Life. Page 17)

"Father...may they be completely one, inorder that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me."

Have you ever been aware of that someone is praying for you - personally? I shared with an adult class last week that I find that to be one of the richest Christian experiences. It's embarrassing because we're not accustomed to getting that close. The Session of this Church takes time out of every meeting to pray for those members who are sick, and Sunday after Sunday you are asked to pray for each other. I think that's important - I think it is essential for us to struggle to maintain an element of the personal in our congregational life. I think the minute we forget that we lose whatever it is we have to offer to the world. For we are called to stand

fast in Love and Joy.

In Jesus Christ God chose to come among us in a way that is personal. That man told about a God who cared about human life, not in the abstract, but the indiv idual lives of men, women and children. In Christ God has met us where we are and he calls us to meet each other, in love and joy and unity.

There is power in that - power to change lives - power to communicate something about the very nature of God to a world that will listen when our words are confirmed by our actions.

We are "One in the Spirit" and "they will - or will not - know we are Christians by our love." AMEN

FATHER, forgive us for our failures in love. And grant us to see each other in the light of your love. Give us grace to care, and the courage to express it: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN